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AUTHOR Virts, Paul H.; Keeler, John D.
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ABSTRACT

In order to stimulate scholars to investigate systematically and fully the religious dimension of dramatic television content, the first part of this paper develops a basic framework for such study. After establishing the importance of this kind of research, it defines and explains the four basic variables that would have to be examined: general society, media gatekeepers, media content, and media audiences. After listing some of the special problems that must be faced in studying religion and television, the paper then presents a critical evaluation of one week of prime time television drama undertaken to determine whether the framework was appropriate and comprehensive and to draw some preliminary conclusions about the religious content of television programing. Among the conclusions presented are that (1) much programing has no religious content at all, (2) in shows with religious content, such content is rarely central to the plot, (3) portrayal of religion tends to be stereotypical, (4) most religious portrayal has a Judeo-Christian flavor, and (5) religious characters are portrayed as social servants, not spiritual leaders. A table of categories for content analysis of network prime time television drama and a short conclusion on the survey and framework complete the document. (JL)

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PORTRAYAL OF RELIGION IN PRIME-TIME TELEVISION DRAMA

Paul H. Virts, Ph.D.
John D. Keeler, Ph.D.

CBN University
Virginia Beach, Virginia

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Introduction

This investigation began with the assumption that despite quite a bit of general examination and research related to the content of prime time television drama, few studies had focused on the treatment of religious characters, themes, and values within this televised drama. It was hoped that a very specific investigation of religious content could be undertaken.

A search of literature validated this basic assumption, but also revealed an overriding need. It appears that to this point, scholars have not developed a basic framework for systematically studying the religious dimension of television drama. Accordingly, the complexity of this area of study has not been fully delineated. Key variables and their interrelationships have not been clearly identified. Significant questions that researchers should be answering about religious content in television drama have not been thoroughly formulated. Appropriate research methodologies for investigating this area of study and particular methodological problems associated with conducting research of religious content in drama (or other forms of programming for that matter) have not been set forth. Even the fundamental importance of conducting studies of this nature has not been well established.

As a result of discovering this apparent need, the primary purpose of this investigation of religious content in television drama has become greater in scope. It is an attempt to establish purpose and research guidelines for this entire area of study. This is being done with the hope that interest will be stimulated among scholars to investigate systematically and fully this dimension of dramatic television content. Eventually, it is hoped that full-fledged communication theories regarding religious content in television drama will emerge from systematic and collective research efforts. A secondary

purpose is to conduct a preliminary, exploratory investigation of the portrayal of religion in prime time television drama.

The Importance of Studying Religion on Television

The question, "Why is the study of religion on television important?", needs to be answered at the outset. There appear to be three key reasons why communication scholars should be making this a matter of utmost research importance.

First, much has been written about the influence of mass media and mass media content on society in the past several decades. There also has been much speculation about the influence of society on mass media content, although this has received less scrutiny than the first area. Research related to these basic areas has focused on many types of media, media content, and contexts. Various research methodologies have been utilized.

In recent years, media scholars have been fairly systematically studying the content of prime time television. The most extensive research has been conducted on the portrayal of violence on television. Prime time television portrayal of women,[1] blacks,[2] the elderly,[3] businessmen, Hispanic-Americans, drinking and sexual behavior, family relationships and other content variables also have been the focus of investigations. Despite this fairly extensive research, religion in dramatic television content has been largely overlooked. In addition, any discussion of religious content which has taken place has dealt mainly with overtly religious programs which generally have small audiences rather then widely viewed dramatic programming containing more subtle (yet possibly very influential) religious elements.

This seems strange considering that religion and/or religious matters are often a major dimension of individual American lives. Equally important,

American society has religion interwoven in the fabric of its heritage, cultures, values and institutions. Most of American society is particularly rooted in a Judeo-Christian heritage dating back to the early colonists and the values, laws and institutions they brought with them, further developed and perpetuated. Yet communication scholars generally have ignored this important aspect of life and history as they have examined programming content within one of the most influential modern institutions--television.

A second major reason for studying the religous content of prime time television is tied to the notion that television content has an affect on audiences. Researchers have studied the effects of television on children, women, minorities, and other groups. They have discovered that some of these effects are directly harmful to audience members and that at least television content can influence the way audience members perceive and treat each other. There is a great need to investigate thoroughly how Judeo-Christian and other religious television programming content generally influences audience members and helps shape their perceptions of religion, religious people, and religious behavior.

A third basic justification for the study of religious content on television is quite practical in nature. Past research on television content and its effect on audiences has had a rhetorical function in addition to its information one. For example, research dealing with women, blacks, and children relative to television content has been used to support policy positions within government and media institutions. Similarly, there is a current rhetorical use for results emerging from the study of religious content on television, particularly prime time television.

An increasingly complex, volatile issue regarding religion and television has developed in American society in recent years. A seeming plethora of conservative and/or Christian coalitions and groups have collectively, vociferously, and sometimes effectivly criticized and lobbied against the alleged mistreatment of Judaism and Christianity and Judeo-Christian values on television and by television organizations. Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and Rev. Donald Wildman's Coalition for Better Television have been the most publicized of these groups. Their efforts have been focused primarily against the three major television networks (CBS, NBC, ABC) and on prime time television programming. Advertisers of certain programming also have been threatened with boycotts.

The fundamental premise of this movement opposing current television programming content is that the Judeo-Christian heritage, values and institutions upon which American society was strongly built have been eroded, neglected, mistreated and mocked in recent years. The contention is that television programming content has played a major role in this deterioration, particularly by sanctioning more liberal, less biblical morals by, portraying Judeo-Christian figures and institutions in the worst possible light, and by more favorably portraying other types of religions and occult activities.

In response to this the major television networks, their advertisers, some members of the press, and others have typically: 1) denied such allegations 2) tried to portray these conservative critics as narrow-minded and dangerous 3) noted that the content of most dramatic television programming is merely a reflection of the changing attitudes, values and behavior of today's American society. They, too, have formed special interest and lobby groups to deal with the issue.

Both sides of this very important issue frequently have claimed to have thoroughly examined television content as they have made their charges and countercharges. Some have even cited studies they have conducted. The most significant point relative to the thrust of this paper, however, is that these studies have been generally superficial and non-scientific. Missing in this societal dialogue has been systematically gathered, conclusive evidence regarding the religious content of television programming and its effect on audiences.

A Systemic Approach to the Study of Religion on Television

One limitation of much of the research dealing with the impact of television is that the scope has been so limited. Any research investigation of the impact of television content on religion, then, needs to avoid this pitfall. Again, a systemic approach is needed. What questions need to be answered must be spelled out clearly. Major areas of research should be identified. Various research methodologies should be suggested and appraised. Most important, the proposed research and the results of studies should be integrated into a comprehensive picture of the inter-relationships between the television medium and religion. Certainly no one study can hope to answer all questions, but it is possible to plan a series of projects which will answer many of them.

It would seem that a systemic study of religion and television would examine the nature and relationships among the following basic variables:

1. General Society--religious attitudes, values, practices and institutions in society at large. These may be a result of the influence of television or television programming may merely mirror them.

2. Media Gatekeepers--personal religious values and practices of key persons in the television industry and how this relates to religious content in television programming; these industry leaders' perceptions of religious values, practices, and institutions and how this influences religious content; organizational context, decision processes, legal influences and various production control factors involved in including or excluding religious matters as a topic in television programming.

3. Media Content--the amount of television programming containing references to religious persons, activities, events, beliefs, and institutions; quality and accuracy of the portrayal of religious persons, activities, events, beliefs and institutions.

4. Media Audiences--audience uses and gratifications of programming containing religious content; television viewing behavior as it relates to religious content in programming; religious attitudes, beliefs, and practices of audiences and various audience segments; short term and long term effects of television programming on the religious beliefs and practices of audience members.

Each of these areas of research raise a number of questions which can only be answered adequately via a wide array of research methods.

General Society

Studies dealing with religion in society are particularly important because television and other media gatekeepers frequently claim that they are not so much changing society as they are reflecting society. Investigation of the nature and level of Judeo-Christian and other religious beliefs, values and practices will provide data useful for comparison with television content and the beliefs, values and practices of those who produce television programming.

In recent years, a number of fairly comprehensive studies have attempted to determine the nature and extent of Judeo-Christian attitudes, beliefs and practices in American society. The best and most widely reported of these were studies conducted by the Gallop Organization for various sponsors. Among the key findings were that there is generally 1) nationwide acceptance of traditional values 2) declining confidence in churches and organized

religion 3) a large portion of the population holding Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices 4) discrepancies between what people say they believe and what they practice regarding these matters.[4] A "Connecticut Mutual Life Report of American Values in the 80's" revealed that nearly three-fourths of all Americans consider themselves religious and that "God loves them." Those most religiously committed tended to adhere to more traditional values.[5]

Although these studies have been helpful in providing an overview of American attitudes and behavior toward religion, they have left many important questions unanswered and raised even more. In addition, they have pointed out some serious methodological difficulties associated with using wide scale survey research techniques where religious matters are the focus on a study. First, in-depth lengthy questioning which seems necessary to probe into something as complex and typically sensitive as individual religious attitudes and behavior is hindered in studies which, because of their national scope and large samples, require stricter limits on question schedule time or space.. Second, these studies typically suffer from problems with operationally defining various dimensions of religious beliefs and practices. Consequently, the results of some of these studies have been misinterpreted and misunderstood.

There seem to be a number of critical questions to be asked about religion in society:

- What percentage of Americans adhere to basic Judeo-Christian beliefs (e.g. God, diety of Jesus Christ, infallability, authority of the Bible, etc.)?
- What percentage of Americans are involved in various Judeo-Christian activities (e.g. attend church, contribute toward religious causes, pray, read the Bible etc.)?

- What perceptions do Americans have of Judeo-Christian clergymen? Lay people? (i.e. paraprofessionals who have taken on or been assigned typical clergy functions) Various church denominations and institutions? Judeo-Christian values? Judeo-Christan publications and broadcasting ministries? Other religions, religious leaders and religious activities? Social issues which have religious overtones?

- What percentage of Americans view Judeo-Christian institutions, beliefs, and practices as relevant to their lives? Appropriate for contemporary life?

The use of nationwide surveys should continue to provide the best data to answer these questions. However, it may be best if some of these investigations concentrate on one or a small number of such questions, so that more in-depth information can be obtained. Also, the use of more sophisticated attitudinal scaling devices and statistical analyses might provide richer, more useful information. Future studies should include clearer operational definitions of various religious beliefs and practices as well. Finally, some research should focus on various segments of society (e.g. youth, minority groups, etc.). In general, religion on television can not be fully understood without knowledge of religious perceptions and behavior in society as a whole.

Media Gatekeepers

Probably more significant to the understanding of religious content within television programming is research dealing with key decision-makers within the television medium who have a direct role in determing content. "Gatekeeping" involves various types of information control. How such control is exercised, where it is exercised, and the consequences of such control is the essence of research needed in this area. In the television programming and production process, writers, reporters, editors, directors, producers, syndicators, and network standards departments are some of the "gatekeepers"

researchers have identified and studied. A good deal of research has been conducted on the factors which various television decision-makers consider when making their decisions. Some of these factors include personal opinion, perceptions of audience expectations and so forth.[6] Two research methodologies have typically been used for studying gatekeepers - surveys and participant observation.

The importance of studying television gatekeepers is rooted in the hypothesis that the personal attitudes, beliefs, values and perceptions of relatively few key people have direct bearing on the nature of television programming. It might be hypothesized further, then, that television gatekeepers' perceptions of the significance of Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices in society generally, their own religious beliefs and practices, their own perceptions of Judeo-Christians and their beliefs and practices, and their perceptions of professional and audience expectations regarding the portrayal of religion greatly influence the ultimate portrayal of religion in their programming.

Research investigations which have dealt with the religious perceptions of television gatekeepers have been few in number. Licther and Rothman discovered in interviewing the "media elite" (within key print media and major network news departments) that news gatekeepers tend to be politically liberal, white males who were typically reared in the Midwest and Northeast. Half had no religious affiliation and most "seldom or never" attended church.[7] Stein attempted to understand the background, attitudes and perceptions of television and film entertainment industry gatekeepers via a participant observation study and interviews.[8] Among other findings, he concluded that personal religious beliefs of these gatekeepers was not a

critical factor in determining programming or movie content (i.e. religion was simply not a decision-making consideration). However, he also concluded that many of these gatekeepers are somewhat isolated from the mainstream of society (and accordingly, general religious beliefs and practices). The previously cited Connecticut Mutual Life study provides some additional data on the values of media gatekeepers. Among various types of leaders studied, these media gatekeepers tended more often to religious and moral values which seem to be in conflict with biblically-rooted, Judeo-Christian principles and values.[9] In an early study, Cantor discovered a disproportionately high number of persons of Jewish and Catholic background respresented among "Hollywood" television producers.[10]

A number of important questions should guide research in this area:

- What basic religious beliefs and activities do television gatekeepers adhere to or practice?
- How do they generally perceive Judaism and Christianity? Judeo-Christian values? Various church denominations and their professional and lay leaders?
- What are their perceptions of Judeo-Christian history? Practices? The Bible?
- What are gatekeepers' perceptions of other forms of religion? Cults? Occult? Science vs. religion?
- What are their perceptions regarding the Judeo-Christian beliefs and practices of society at large? To what extent do gatekeepers think their programs reflect society's religious views and practices?
- Do gatekeepers feel an obligation to reflect society's religious beliefs and practices? Why do they portray religious peoples, practices and institutions as they do?
- Do gatekeepers view their own religious beliefs and practices as typical of the population?
- Is religion an important factor in programming decision-making processes? What decision processes are involved in including or excluding religious content within programs?

- How might religious values, beliefs, and practices vary among different type of gatekeepers (i.e. writers, producers, programming executives, etc.)

In-depth personal interviews and other forms of survey research with various kinds of gatekeepers need to be conducted to provide answers to these and other questions. Studies focusing on decision-making processes of gatekeepers need to be developed in this light. Participant observer studies, although difficult to implement and somewhat lacking in objectivity, are more ideal in that they more freely permit acquisition of data on daily decision-making and information control. Having gatekeepers "role play" decision-making in experimental settings has been somewhat successful in a few instances when it has been tried.

Media Content

Examination of television programming content is obviously at the heart of any systematic investigation of religion on television. Data emerging from studies of content can be compared with the findings of research on gatekeepers' attitudes and perceptions and with the results of studies dealing with religious beliefs and practices in society generally. The relative influence of gatekeepers and society in general on religious content in television programming may be better classified.

There has been a good deal of fairly systematic analysis of television programming content in recent years, most notably Gerbner's efforts to examine violent content within prime time television programming and to relate it to audience perceptions of violence.[11] Some of the cause and effect conclusions of this research have been seriously challenged.[12] In addition, his sampling procedures, neglect of verbal (as opposed to physical) violence, and failure to study style, format and plot nuances have been questioned.[13]

Greenberg, et.al. fairly systematically studied prime time television programming content in order to determine the portrayal of Hispanic-Americans, blacks, the elderly, sex roles, anti- and pro-social behaviors, family relationships, alcohol and drug use and other factors.[14]

Content analyses which systematically focus on religious content in television programming, particularly dramatic television programming, are few. Stein examined programming relative to his participant observer study. He noted that "in prime time, religion is mostly an irrelevancy, thrown in to move the plot along and with no importance one way or another."[15] Keckley conducted a qualitative analysis of the portrayal of religion in dramatic television programming content. He found that 1) organized religion was fairly regularly treated in prime time television programming, although it seldom affected plot direction or character behavior 2) programs with a moralistic thrust contained more information about religion 3) most religious information was visual and non-verbal 4) churches (particularly, Roman Catholic and Baptist churches), denominations and non-specific cults were most frequently portrayed (in that order) 5) no specific religious group was treated more favourably 6) three dimensions characterized organized religion in television drama: structural church-orientation; a conservative ideology; inconsequential role in the lives of the program characters.[16]

Generally, a great many research questions regarding the religious content of television programming, particularly prime time television drama have not been set forth. Those who examine television content from this perspective should consider:

- What percentage of prime time programs contain certain reference to or portrayal of religious persons, activities, beliefs, places, and/or objects? Which of these categories is referred to most frequently?

- What types of religious persons, activities, beliefs, places and objects are portrayed? How are religous persons, activities, beliefs, places and objects portrayed?

- In what types of programs are these persons, activities, beliefs, places and objects portrayed?

- In what settings and scenes are religious persons, activities, beliefs, places and objects portrayed? What is the denominational focus--Jewish, Roman Catholic, Protestant, etc.--of the religious portrayal?

- What Judeo-Christian values are portrayed? How are they portrayed?

Analysis of religious content in prime time television drama can be undertaken and better understood on the basis of these general research questions. Researchers have attempted to make a distinction between critical or literary analysis of television programming content versus more systematic content analysis. The latter normally "takes sequences, characters and events and the unit of analysis and deliberately aggregates these into sum totals, outside the context of the plots and themes in which they are embodied".[17] The former approach views content more holistically, but tends to ignore possible effects content elements have on the perceptions of viewers. Both are viable research perspectives, but in either case, it would seem there is a need for more precision where the concern is religious content.

Any research investigation of religious content within television drama also should be both quantitative and qualitiative in nature. The amount of portrayal of Judeo-Christian and other religious people, activities, beliefs, places and objects is important, but even more important may be the quality of the portrayal. In addition, most systematic content analyses require not only considerable counting of incidents, but a great deal of subjective evaluation as to what content categories in which to place those incidences. Analysis of religious content in television drama is especially wrought with difficulties in this respect. Consequently, coder training and testing of intercoder

reliability are of particular significance.

Audiences

A systematic study of religion and television comes full circle with the investigation of television program audiences. This last segment of research focuses on how audiences use the media and religious content in television programming and what impact the media, and particularly religious content in television programming, have on these audiences. In addition, it is important to study the possible impact these audiences have on general societal views of religious persons, activities, beliefs, values, places and objects. Without audience research, one is limited to simply inferring from content what types of influence it will have on audiences.

Television audience research in the past has been severely limited with regard to religious content in dramatic programming. Only professional research service ratings data for programming with predominantly religious content has been obtained to any extent. However, existing ratings data could be used to consider the impact of dramatic television programming which clearly contains religious content. A number of questions need to be raised about the audiences of television programming (particularly dramatic programming) with religious content:

- How many people watch dramatic television programming which contains extensive religious content? What demographic and psychographic characteristics do these audiences have? How does this compare with characteristics of the total population?

- What motivations do audiences have for viewing dramatic television programming which portrays Judeo-Christian persons, activities, beliefs and values? What gratifications do they receive from watching such programming? What differences among audiences exist when such Judeo-Christian portrayals are positive as opposed to negative in nature?

- Does the input of religious characters, activities and beliefs in television drama increase audience size or decrease it? Does it increase the impact of the program or decrease it? What specific portrayals of religious themes, persons, activities, beliefs, values, places and objects have the greatest impact?

- How do audience members perceive the portrayal of Judeo-Christian persons, activities, beliefs, values, places, and objects? How do they perceive the quality of that portrayal? How much religion do they believe is portrayed? Are audiences satisfied or dissatisfied with the amount of religious portrayal?

- What percentage of audience members adhere to various Judeo-Christian beliefs, values and practices? How do various audience segments vary in this respect?

- What influence does prime time television drama have on audience perceptions of religion and particularly Judeo-Christian persons, practices, beliefs and values? On what level (cognitive, affective, behaviorial) is the influence most pronounced? Is this influence positive or negative?

- Are members of the audiences "opinion leaders"?

Since little audience data of this type exists, any form of research study would be beneficial, particularly surveys, field experiments and the use of projective techniques. However, probably the greatest need in this area is for cross sectional and longitudinal studies which attempt to measure the long term effects of religious content in dramatic television programming on audiences. It is most likely that any widespread or significant changes in religious attitudes, beliefs and behavior which result from such programming take place gradually over long periods of time and viewing.

Special Problems in Studying Religion and Television

Regardless of which key variables or research questions are focused on, there are certain special problems confronting the researcher when studying religion as it relates to television programming content:

1. There is difficulty in operationally defining religious persons, attitudes, beliefs, values, activities, places and objects. First a scarcity of research regarding religion and television has left a void in operational definitions which researchers can build upon. Second, religious attitudes, beliefs, and values generally are extraordinarily complex, interrelated and less frequently manifested. For example, there are considerable problems in attempting to study and measure how Judeo-Christian values are treated in television drama because such values often reflect some of the tenents of other religions and philosophies and general American values as well.

2. The deep rooted beliefs and religious dimension of individual lives is extremely difficult to uncover through research efforts. Research methodologies typically are restricted to revealing the more superficial and mundane of attitudes and behavior. Thus it is a hard task to determine clearly what religious attitudes, beliefs and values are held by society members, gatekeepers, and television audiences.

3. It has been purported in this paper that studying religious content in dramatic television programming is a rather complex endeavor requiring systematic study. However, this presents a problem for the researchers with limited time or money. What particular research variables and questions should be focused on?

4. In measuring the impact on audiences of religious content in dramatic television programming there are unique difficulties in preventing study respondents from providing "socially desirable" answers to questions dealing with sensitive, religious matters.

5. Any research study attempting to determine the impact on audiences of religious content in dramatic television programming is bound to have difficulty in sifting out the impact of religious elements from other types of influences the programming may contain.

6. Additionally, it is difficult to sort out the audience impact of religious content within television programming from other influences in society which help shape people's attitudes towards religion (e.g. public policy, organized church, etc).

7. Analysis of religious content and its effect is going to be influenced by the time of year the programming is aired. Christmas, Easter, and other religious holiday seasons generate more programs containing such content and more receptive audiences.

8. Although there probably is more need for studies which measure the long term rather than short term effects of religious content in television programming, such research investigations are much more difficult to undertake.

9. There must be some effort to sort out the relative influence of religious content in dramatic television programming as opposed to programming with predominantly religious content (e.g. worship services, religious talk shows, etc.).

10. The matter of studying something as elusive s Judeo-Christian values is a particularly difficult task. Exactly what is Judeo-Christian value?

Religious Content in Prime Time Television Drama: A Critical Investigation

Given all the variables and research questions regarding religious content in dramatic television programming which need to be studied, where do individual researchers start their investigations into this important area of study? A logical place to start is with an examination of the content itself, to determine more clearly what religious elements are there. The most reasonable content to study first would appear to be that contained in prime time television drama produced by the three major television networks, since it is this programming which reaches the largest audiences.

With this in mind, it was decided to conduct a cursory, critical evaluation of one week of prime time television drama to determine whether the various research questions which had been developed for studying religious content were appropriate and comprehensive, as well as to draw some preliminary observations and generalizations. Then, based on the findings of Keckley and others related to religious content in television drama, research regarding television content generally, and the results generated from this particular critical investigation of religious content in prime time drama, an attempt was made to construct a content analysis categorization scheme which might help researchers conduct more precise, systematic investigations of religious elements in this type of programming.

The critical investigation of religious content in prime time television drama involved viewing programs primarily aired during a week in September, 1982. Both new programs premiere episodes and episodes of programs which had been introduced in past television seasons were analysed. A number of seemingly pertinent observations were derived from this subjective analysis:

1. A great deal of prime time television drama seems to contain no portrayal of religious persons, beliefs, values, practices, places or objects. If this rough sampling of programming accurately represents prime time television drama generally, a major consideration and question for reseachers may be, what is the short term and long term impact of having little or no religious content in such programming, especially in a society where a high proportion of people indicate that active church participation or at least an active relationship with God is important to them? An absence of religious content does seem to confirm that television gatekeepers minimally consider religion in their program decision-making.

2. When religious persons, beliefs, values, activities, places and objects are portrayed within prime time dramatic television programming, the portrayal typically does not appear to be central to the program's plot. Only two programs from among the sample which were viewed tended to focus on religious matters. An episode of Little House on the Prairie concentrated on Christian faith in God, the Bible, the power of prayer and miracles as the primary character, Charles Ingels, and his wife deal with their son's near death and recovery. In an episode of a science fiction mini-series entitled The Martian Chronicles, one of the subplots involved an evangelizing "priest" who wrestles with his faith (an

ambiguous set of beliefs with Judeo-Christian overtones) as he attempts to find and convert Martians.

3. Portrayal of religious persons, beliefs, activities, places, and objects tends to be stereotypical. Catholic priests and protestant pastors are dressed, speak and behave in expected, sometimes outdated, often unrealistic ways. For example, in two viewed programs priests wore traditional monk garb. These religious professionals tend to be used much more often than non-professionals in this way. Rather superficial religious cliches such as "say a prayer for us", "may God be with you", "what can I do for you my son?", and "Go in peace" were found in other programs. Stereotypical wedding and funeral scenes, churches, and objects (there seems to be a great deal of use of crosses to symbolize religious matters) were found in still other programs. One question this generalization raises is, are the makers of dramatic television programming purposely portraying religion stereotypically because audiences expect it that way? Or, are programmers using stereotypical portrayals mainly for dramatic effect?

4. Most portrayal of religious persons, beliefs, activities, places and objects has a Judeo-Christan flavor.

5. More portrayals of Judeo-Christian persons, beliefs, values, activities, places, and objects appear to be negative rather than positive. For example, an ongoing character, Father Mulkahey, in one viewed program, M*A*S*H*, typifies this. He is a priest who is likeable, but basically bumbling, respected but not really listened to, and helpful but rarely in a spiritual sense. In a premiere of a program entitled, Tales of the Gold Monkey, clergy garb was used by a major character as a

disguise, sanctimonious music was played in the scenes in which he appeared and he spoke of "blessing" (with definite sexual connotations) certain native girls. In the same episode, Bibles are used to smuggle information.

6. Religious characters are portrayed as social servants, not spiritual leaders. Clergy and other religious persons solve social, political and economic problems by helping people sort out issues, smooth out personal relationships, aid and comfort each other, and give instead of take. The focus is on an individual's relationships among others rather than on a relationship with or faith in God. Where religious figures are portrayed positively to some extent, they are nice people who seldom make meaningful reference to a supreme being. Father Mulkahey in M*A*S*H*, and Father Murphy (in a program entitled the same) and a priest friend are ongoing television characters who exemplify this behavior. There seems to be little depth to these characters and their faith is neither central to the program plots nor consequential to their roles.

7. There seems to be increasing portrayal of occult and psychic phenomena as a major program theme (e.g. Powers of Matthew Starr; Phoenix).

8. Religion tends to be portrayed most frequently in crises types of events (e.g. death has occurred or is imminent; sickness, accidents), although one might conclude that this merely reflects the instances when religion is more salient in people's lives generally.

9. Amid crises or troubles, prime time dramatic television program characters tend to make vague, philosophical statements about life or oblique references to some supernatural power rather than direct

references to God and/or religious faith. For example, in an episode of a new program, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, a major character talks about being "guided by the voice that is deep inside" without specifying what that means. In the viewed M*A*S*H* episode, a primary character calms his colleaques in a crisis by stating simply "you can't control your own destiny". "Everybody makes a mistake" noted a character on Gimme a Break, as a question of pregnancy out of wedlock is dealt with. In a feature movie, The Royal Romance: Prince Charles and Lady Diane, a woman maintains a long bedside vigil beside her deathly ill husband and exclaims to her daughters that family cohesion is necessary so that "our love can bring him back". God is not mentioned, although a narrator at the end of the movie notes that, "all of us have the power to make the world more in God's image through love".

10. Various Judeo-Christian values appear to be treated both positively and negatively depending on the particular value, program, and its specific content. It is clear from the cursory review of programs which was made, that the study of religious values may be the most difficult area of investigation for researchers to handle methodologically and conclusively.

11. Religion tends to be portrayed most extensively and in greater depth when it is placed in a historic or futuristic setting. Could it be that television programmers do not see religion as relevant to contemporary times?

Categories for Content Analysis of Network Prime Time Television Drama

Although the brief analysis of the content of prime time television drama which was undertaken relative to this paper was hardly exhaustive or conclusive, it did seem to confirm the need for systematic research in this area. It also reinforced the notion that there are so many variables and so much complexity to deal with regarding religious content in television drama that a precise categorization scheme for conducting content analysis is needed. A seemingly workable set of categories is contained in the following table.

TABLE I

Categories for Content Analysis of Network Prime Time Television Drama

Type of Program

Situation comedy
Movie
  Made for Television
  Made for theater distribution
Variety
Continuing drama (e.g. soap operas)
Action-Adventure
  Detective
  Mystery/suspense
  Western

Denominational Focus
Jewish
Roman Catholic
Protestant
  Particular denomination
Other (i.e. non Judeo-Christian
  religious organizations)

Network

ABC
CBS
NBC

Time of Day
Specific hour

Context
General
  Urban/rural
  Contemporary/historical/future
  Humorous/serious
Setting
  Overt religious (e.g. church,
   synogoques, worship service)/
   non-religious

Length of Presentation
Program length
  less than 30 minutes/
    30 minutes/
    60 minutes/
    90 minutes
    120 minutes
    more than 120 minutes
Within program length

Mode of Presentation
Verbal only
  Positive/negative statement of religious beliefs
    Evaluative statement about persons/activities/beliefs/values/
      places/objects
  Verbal setting or types of conversation
    Purely religious issues/domestic matters/business/crime/
      love and courtship/public issues/racial issues
Sound effects
Visual only
  Persons/activities/places/objects
Verbal and visual

Persons
Religious
  Clergy (i.e. religious professional as identified by statement of profession, role, dress, behavior)
  Non-professional (i.e. clearly religious as identified by characterization, statement of beliefs, dress or behavior)
Non-religious
  Neutral toward religion/anti-religion
Role importance
  Major/minor
  Continuing series/episode
Demographics
  Sex
  Ethnic identity (race, nationality)
  Occupation
  Age
Image portrayed
  General attractiveness/unattractiveness
  Specific physical characteristics (e.g. body build, handicaps, accents, etc.)
  Dress (e.g. casual/formal, fashionable/outdated, sloppy/neat)
  Contemporary/out-of-date
  Compliant/independent
  Give orders/take orders
  Intelligent/unintelligent
  Emotional/not emotional
  Honest/dishonest
  Affectionate (i.e. amount of hugging, kissing, holding hands, etc.)/hostile
  Outgoing/shy
Interaction with others
  Positive/neutral/negative toward
  Respected by others/disrespected by others
Types of activities involved in

Activities
Overtly religious Judeo-Christian (e.g. weddings, funerals, baptism, other rituals, Bible reading, prayer, spiritual counseling, miracles)
Non-religious (e.g. any activities not clearly religiously oriented or linked to Judeo-Christian practices and behavior)
Non-Judeo-Christian religious phenomen (e.g. occult activities, astrology, psychic phenomena)
Central to plot/marginal to plot

Objects
Bible/Torah, etc.
Menorah
Cross
Signs
Books
Statues

Values
Support Judeo-Chrisitan (Biblical) believe/discredit
Judeo-Christian beliefs

It becomes clear when examining this categorization scheme for analysis of religious content in television drama that while it serves as a useful framework for systematically studying such content, it may be best to focus on a few or even one category (or subsets of a category) in any specific research project. Possibly the most promising area of study may be to concentrate on the portrayal of religious characters, since in doing so most other categories are at least indirectly dealt with. To enrich the quality of data gathered from such analysis, a variety of evaluative scales might be used. The bipolar nature of many of the key variables seems to lend itself to such scaling (e.g. humorous v. serious setting). In effect, a measure of the degree of rather than mere number of incidences in various specific categories would bring analyses of these types a step further away from simple critical appraisals of content.

Conclusion

If anything, this critical investigation of religious content in prime time television drama and the ensuing content analysis categorization scheme which was generated have raised even more questions than have been previously set forth. Indeed, it is clear that a framework for investigation of this entire area of study was needed. It is hoped that what has been broadly delineated in this paper will help serve that purpose. It also is envisioned that over time communication researchers will add to what has been presented here and will collectively deal with various portions of this important area of study so that theoretical models depicting processes at work and interrelationships among variables will be developed regarding religious television content and its impact.

At the outset of this paper, there was an attempt to establish that a major reason for conducting investigations of religious content in prime time television drama is that the nature of such content and its impact on audiences is an important current societal issue. On the one hand, there are those who believe portrayal of religion, particularly Judaism and Christianity, is largely negative and harmful to television audiences. Others contend that any portrayal of religion, religious values and religious behavior merely reflects what is happening in society generally and has no negative impact on audiences.

The results of the cursory critical investigation of prime time television drama suggest that neither side of this issue is totally correct. It appears that when religious matters are portrayed in prime time television drama, the portrayal tends to be negative. However, it also appears that the amount of portrayal of religion in television drama presented during prime time is much less than some have suggested.

ENDNOTES

[1] A number of studies deal with the portrayal of women in prime time television including: J. Leman, "Dominant or Dominated? Women in Prime-Time Television," in Tuchman, Daniels, and Benet (eds.), Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, pp. 51-68.

[2] Portrayal of blacks in television drama has been examined by several scholars including: J. Hinton, et. al. Tokenism and Improving Imagery of Blacks in TV Drama and Comedy," Journal of Broadcasting, 1974, 18, pp. 423-432.; J. Seggar and P. Wheeler, "World of Work on TV: Ethnic and Sex Representation in TV Drama," Journal of Broadcasting, 1973, 17, pp. 201-214; and H. Northcott, et. al., "Trends in TV Portrayal of Blacks and Women," Journalism Quarterly, 1975, 52, 741-744.

[3] Bradley S. Greenberg, Life on Television: Content Analyses of U.S. TV Drama, Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1980. This reports the findings of a series of studies on the elderly, businessmen, Hispanic-Americans, drinking and social behavior and other. However, other scholars also have done studies in each of these areas.

[4] The Princeton Religion Research Center and The Gallop Organization, Inc., The Unchurched American, 1978, and the Gallup Organization Inc., "The Christianity Today - Gallup Poll: An Overview," in Christianity Today, December 21, 1979, pp. 12-19.

[5] Research and Forecasts, Inc., "The Connecticut Mutual Life Report on American Values in the '80's: The Impact of Belief," for Connecticut Mutual Life Company, 1981.

[6] Paul Virts, "Television Entertainment Gatekeeping: A Study of Local Television Program Director's Decision Making", unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Iowa, 1979.

[7] S. Robert Lichter and Stanley Rothman Public Opinion, October/November, 1981.

[8] Ben Stein, The View From Sunset Boulevard, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979.

[9] Research and Forecasts, Inc., op.cit.

[10] Muriel G. Cantor, The Hollywood TV Producer, New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1971, pp. 233-241.

[11] George Gerbner, et.al., Violence Profile No. 8: Trends in Network Television Drama and Viewer Concepts of Social Reality, 1967-1976. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1977. Several other works dealing with the same topic area and under this authors' name have been published.

[12] Hirsch, Paul M. Communication Research, Vol. 7, No. 4, October 1980, Part I, pg. 403-456,, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 1981, Part II, pg.3-37.

[13] Muriel Cantor, Prime-Time Television: Content and Control, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1980, p. 39

[14] Bradley S. Greenberg, op.cit.

[15] Ben Stein, op.cit., pp. 101-102.

[16] Paul H. Keckley Jr., A Qualitative Analytic Study of the Image of Organized Religion in Prime Time Television Drama. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1974, pp. 139-140.

[17] Muriel Cantor, Prime-Time Television: Content and Control, op.cit., p. 41.